

Applying the “Selfie Syndrome” to Music Education

(Part II) Book Review by Paul Fox ■ Printed in the Summer 2020 issue of *PMEA News*
UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World

by Michele Borba, Ed.D

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What do we teach? Music, right? *Response* to and *performance, analysis, and composition* of music? Aren't these our fundamental goals... not just to support the learning of math facts, enhancing reading, or improving standardized test scores? The often-distributed poster “Why Teach Music?” indicates that school music may be defined as many things (<https://www.pmea.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/whyteach.pdf>), and research also seems to confirm that “music makes us smarter” and “studying music fosters success in other areas,” but less is said on “music for music’s sake!” (See my “epistle” at <https://paulfox.blog/2019/06/16/the-importance-of-music-education/>.)

But what is our *penultimate* purpose as music educators?

Several decades ago, in revising our Fine and Performing Arts curriculum, my Upper St. Clair School District music staff settled on several objectives including “to promote the skills of **creative self-expression** by using music, art, dance, and/or drama as vehicles for defining the students’ self-identity, learning concepts, communicating **thoughts and feelings**, and exploring mankind’s musical heritage in order to gain a broad cultural and historical perspective.” That’s quite a mouthful. So, it’s not just about pitch matching, quarter notes, and Italian expressions?

And yet, what we *really* do as Grades Pre-K to 12 music-certified teachers is teach... “children.”

Numerous educational movements have come (and some have gone), assigned to the faculty as the latest in-service initiatives, sometimes cynically labeled as the “flavor of the year!” In professional development workshops, many of you have been exposed to the geniuses of Charlotte Danielson (The Four Domains of School Improvement), Madeline Cheek Hunter (Theory Into Practice Teaching Model), Benjamin Bloom (New Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives) and Norman Webb (Depth of Knowledge), Stephen Covey (7 Habits of Highly Effective People), Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (Understanding By Design), and the concepts of “Outcome-Based” or “Standards-Based” education, “Inquiry-Based” instruction, “The Common Core,” “The Four Cs – 21st Century Learning Skills,” “The Whole Child,” “Individualized,” “Personalized,” or “Differentiated” learning, among countless others.

Along comes this “book for our time” (I reviewed in the Spring 2020 issue of *PMEA News*) – *UnSelfie – Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World* by Dr. Michele Borba, Ed.D., with a framework of **nine essential habits of empathy**:

1. Emotional Literacy (recognition of the feelings and needs of self and others)
2. Moral Identity (adoption of caring values that guide integrity and activate empathy)
3. Perspective Taking (appreciation of another person’s feelings, thoughts, and views)
4. Moral Imagination (use of literature, films, and emotionally charged images as a source of inspiration to feel with others)

5. Self-Regulation (management of strong emotions and reduction of personal distress)
6. Practicing Kindness (increased concern about the welfare and feelings of others)
7. Collaboration (working together in the achievement of shared goals for the benefit of all)
8. Moral Courage (resolution to speak out, step in, and help others)
9. Altruistic Leadership (motivation to make a difference for others)

Last fall, I had the privilege of seeing Dr. Borba in person presenting a powerful and engaging lecture, “Raising Caring, Successful Kids in a Plugged-In, Trophy-Driven World.” In the session as well as throughout her book, she emphasizes that the “selfie syndrome” is leading to excessive “self-promotion, personal branding, and self-interest at the exclusion of others’ feelings, needs, and concerns. It’s permeating our culture and slowly eroding our children’s character.” In short, she charges educators and parents alike to focus on enhancing the children’s “social-emotional competencies, resilience, academic success, leadership, healthy relationships, moral courage, happiness and mental health.”

As you read *UnSelfie*, you are encouraged to reflect on what may be indicators of the “empathy crisis” in your own schools, music classrooms, and rehearsals, and apply the practice of at least a few of Borba’s habits. Here are several of my own meanderings regarding the “dumbing down” or numbing of the emotional quotient, little “team” orientation, and missing study of “character” in our school curriculum, and the seemingly increased emphasis on “the me – not the we!”

- Have you noticed a growing trend of “drop and run” by parents of younger music students participating in extra-curricular and community activities? Their excuse? “We have so many errands and cannot waste time staying at the event!” In some settings, it may be more difficult to foster parent participation at booster meetings, find extra hands to set-up/clean-up concert receptions, chaperoning*, plan fund-raising projects, sign-up to volunteer on other PTA/music committees, etc.
- *However, in my experience with secondary music programs, the ultimate model of parent engagement may be demonstrated by marching band parents chaperoning at home and away football games, festivals, and music trips! During the fall season, one benefit of band is that “the parents know where their kids are on Friday nights!” We often hear that “one of the safest activities sponsored by the school is band/choir/orchestra and the spring musical...” with entire families usually “rolling up the sleeves” to help.
- “Mandatory fun” is a term referred to requiring student *and* parent attendance to music group activities, such as team-building events, pizza parties, game night, ice cream socials, etc. In the community/youth orchestra I direct on Saturdays, I stopped the rehearsal 30 minutes early to sponsor a “getting to know one another” gathering and Halloween costume contest. However, a handful of the musicians left early prior to participating in the “music theory throw-down” game. I was told, “This is not important. We have many family commitments that are more pressing than... fun and games!”
- This was foremost on mind when I recently wrote a “Fox’s Fireside” (see <https://paulfox.blog/foxs-firesides/>), highlighting the success story of the Washington Nationals baseball team, and especially the star outfielder Gerardo Parra’s concerns that his teammates were not interacting with one another and “celebrating their wins in the clubhouse.” Many have credited him for turning around the team culture and inspiring engagement among the players! Does anyone explain and model *esprit de corps* today?

At my fall concert, I read a portion of Parra's interview on the *CBS This Morning* program and played his walk-on song "Baby Shark" which eventually became the team's anthem. Some have hinted that this tune and the resulting collaboration (a.k.a. "partying") in the clubhouse may have helped to unify and motivate the team, reversing their losing streak in May 2019, winning 75 of their last 100 games, reaching the post-season, and becoming the World Series Champions.

- One could argue that the development of good "ensemble-playing" skills (listening to one another, synchronizing the playing of articulations, entrances, releases, and styles, and anticipating the needs of the dynamic blend/balance of the different players and sections) may require enhanced empathy and sensitivity. The common practice of the "give and take" in performing chamber music is promoted by habits (#3) Perspective Taking and (#7) Collaboration. As musicians who must uniformly come together, "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts."
- I am told that we have an epidemic of stage fright and performance anxiety among our undergraduate music majors. The pursuit of creative self-expression should be an aesthetic self-realization and inspirational "calling," not the cause of significant tension or stress. However, music as a career is highly competitive – sometimes cut-throat! Several of my college professors were "artist teachers" who seemed to lack compassion or seldom used empathy in their studio. (I have heard many stories of conductors and private teachers who "annihilated" their musicians when they made mistakes!) Parallel to Borba's discussion on the mission of seeking "perfect" grades and test scores, parents and teachers alike need to *nurture* the setting of realistic, attainable, and *empathetic* goals and expectations... and quit pushing a focus on "fear and perfection" in our profession.
- The stress reduction and self-regulation tools she shared in Chapter 5 "Empathetic Kids Can Keep Their Cool" and the U.S. Navy Seals techniques to "stay in control in the midst of chaos" in Chapter 8 "Empathetic Kids Stick Their Necks Out" could have a profound resolution on stage fright and performance jitters, as well as social conflict resolution!
- It's no wonder why we have so few *amateur* or community musical performance opportunities or pastimes. Do we limit singing or playing an instrument solely to the "perfectionists" – only virtuosos or expert artists need ever dabble in the Fine and Performing Arts? I am amused that in order to start a sing-along at an "adult dinner party," the host first has to ply everyone with wine or liquor. "Oh, I don't sing very well."
- Her tip to "look at the color of the talker's eyes" is also the prescription for good posture for singers/actors/dancers/instrumental performers. Standing with a straight/erect back and using frequent eye contact are essential for good public speaking and for "roping in" an attentive, engaged, and supportive audience... in all music, drama, and educational settings!
- "Set unplugged time" is our rehearsal and music class rule. Ensemble members must put aside their devices. But, when we have a snack break, I see them reach for their phones again... instead of carrying on a conversation with their stand/singing partners or enjoying the company of their peers. Sadly, since the participants of my group are from the South Hills/Pittsburgh-area community, they could then miss the opportunity to get to know the diverse (and "fun") students from numerous and unique music programs in our area.
- In Borba's presentation and book, there was a reference to a fraternity dinner party where the individuals were required to put their phones/iPads in the center of the table and the first one to touch them would have to pick up the tab for the entire table. This reminded

me of this insightful episode of National Geographic Channel's *Crowd Control* by Daniel Pink:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCRPVTtVrB4&list=PLivjPDlt6ApSiVoVJVXswIQYCfEj-UEDR&index=13&t=0s>

- In addition, books by Daniel Pink support Borba's "unselfie" premises, like the introduction to the first chapter of *The Whole New Mind - Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* with the author having his brain activity measured while **undergoing a MRI!** His own thesis is all about *empathy* as a necessary skill for the new work force. Check out these links: <https://vimeo.com/56477941> and <http://www.oprah.com/own-super-soul-sunday/six-senses-of-right-brain-thinking-video>.
- Regarding "Moral Imagination" habit #4, music educators should use samples of program music and even biographies of specific composers in their listening lessons or from their ensemble performance repertoire to build an enhanced understanding of the compositions. "Beethoven was nearly totally deaf when he wrote his ninth symphony. The story goes he sawed off the legs of his grand piano so he could play his composition while planting his ear to the floor to sense the faint vibrations. How would you feel if you were never able to hear (or see) your creations?"
- Of course, many teachers will agree ("been there, done that") that #5 "Self-Regulation" is a major part of their preventive discipline program to foster skills of self-control. I have found at times a few of my most immature players "blurt out" their thoughts and feelings (always at inappropriate times interrupting the flow of the rehearsal), and channeling this energy into individual problem solving and tolerance/sensitivity to the needs of other "members of the team" are always challenges and "work in progress."
- Finally, once a year in my school, community, and/or youth ensembles, we spend time in discussion to select a charity for which to raise money to help others less fortunate than we are, and this activity seems to embrace Borba's habits #8 "Moral Courage" and #9 "Altruistic Leadership."

What are your thoughts? What are you doing to encourage *engagement* and *empathy* among your students?